

Beyond the Cosmos

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Brrrrrrrrrp.

Needles the size of an index finger pierced the ground with a sound that could easily be mistaken for a machine gun.

Brrrrp. Brrrrp.

The rows of needles, riddling the earth with holes, looked less like bullet marks and more like wildly dancing searchlights.

It was an unceasing, continuous barrage, a simultaneous fusillade launched at a muzzle velocity north of 1000 m/s.

And yet, in the midst of it all, I was still alive. I waltzed my way amongst the ricocheting projectiles without bleeding off speed.

I was currently tearing across the Neo-Eurasian continent at 1500 kilometres per hour. Since the atmospheric pressure and oxygen concentration here differed from Earth's, breaking the sound barrier proved to be incredibly easy. In about two minutes, I'd clear the wilderness and kick off my assault on their stronghold past the mountain range.

Brrrrp. Brrrrp. Brrrrrrrrrp.

Another relentless, calibrated hail of bullets rained upon me, their aim precise despite the kilometre of altitude between us.

"Hah!"

I somehow batted the inescapable barrage aside with a spinning kick. My right high kick, exceeding the speed of sound, deflected every single bullet.

They flew off with a metallic *clang*, revealing themselves to be bee stringers so large that they resembled stakes. Forget venom or anaphylactic shock. If one of those landed, I'd be reduced to slurry long before my immune system had a chance to panic.

"Whoops!"

Refocusing myself after almost letting my speed drop, I finally punched into the mountainous region.

A rain of bullets relentlessly honed in on me.

Jeez, do they ever learn?

Across the brown, sandpaper-like ground, curtains of needles hammered down with a punishing *crackle*.

Yep, I know this. It's just like Mom's old sewing machine.

Brrrrp. Brrrrp. Meow, meow, meow... Brrrrp.

An odd sound mingled with the machine-gun fire raining down from above.

I glanced up in confusion. For the second time since landing on this planet, I found myself briefly at a loss for words.

"Cats?!"

Yeah. Those were, like, definitely cats. They were about a metre in diameter, crisscrossing erratically right beside me.

No, hold on—to be precise, the only thing remotely feline about them were their heads. Everything from the neck down was unmistakably bee.

"N-No way... absolutely not!" I screamed as I tore through the range of mountains ahead of me.

I'd always disliked anything Sanrio-esque. The Cat-Bees bore down on me, wings churning with a low *buzz*, furious *meows* tearing from their throats as they moved to put down the intruder who'd wandered into their territory.

"Heave-ho, hup!"

The instant I topped the summit, a vast panorama unfolded before me.

Sprawling at the foot of the range was a colossal structure: a massive cat food factory. It looked just like a space center for launching rockets, yet every inch of it bore the grubby fingerprints of human architecture.

"....."

It left me utterly dumbfounded by the sheer absurdity of it all.

Were they cats? Bees? *Pick a lane already!*

How'd those brainless creatures manage to build an entire factory?

They were hard at work hauling trolleys stacked high with cat-food tins in their mouths, their movements ticking along with the precision of a synchronized circuit.

How was this even possible? They didn't have the first concept of language in the first place!

No, all of that could wait. How in the world had I even ended up in this mess in the first place?

The year was 2005 AD.

The location: an unknown planet in some galaxy.

I was on my third planet in my journey to conquer this cosmos. I breathed out a light sigh as the Cat-Bee swarm closed in around me.



A strange way to open, I know. I know. But let me be clear: I'm neither a superweapon nor some cosmic horror. Just a perfectly ordinary girl.

Once, I was a fragile fifteen-year-old Homo sapien nestled in C Prefecture, Japan, on the third planet from the sun. My neighbours would liken me to a French doll—an object of affection so demure it put even the most delicate of flowers to shame.

And yet here I was, wreaking havoc of a scale that'd put the latest weaponry to shame on this unknown world. There's a story behind all of this, believe me. A fairly unremarkable one, if I'm being honest.

My timeline—or story, I should say—began in a hospital a mere ten minutes ago in real time, yet it already felt as though an eternity had already passed.

The background of the entire image is a dense, repeating pattern of small, white, geometric shapes. These shapes include various styles of stars (some with long, thin rays), circles, and crosses. The shapes are scattered across the entire black field, creating a starry or cosmic texture.

Beyond the Cosmos

Nasu
Kinoko

It all started in February, two years earlier, when I found myself admitted to a certain memorial hospital.

The diagnosis was absurd enough to forgo mention; let's just say it was an infection where mental anguish corrupted bodily functions.

I became an inmate of that institution, a fifteen-year-old patient whose symptoms had long since progressed beyond any prospect of treatment.

Nestled in the mountains, this landlocked island of a hospital felt less like a medical facility and more like a lunar outpost, utterly isolated.

Charitably, it was a research facility. Strip the charity away, and it was a prison.

This supposed haven for the infected—where day-to-day life was actually quite tolerable, provided you accepted being a lab specimen—came apart at the seams with terrifying ease on this very day.

Prison, of course, conjures thoughts of escape. And escape, inevitably, leads to riots. Perhaps their mistake was dedicating the entire hospital exclusively to infected patients in the first place. One unlocked door was all the biohazards needed to come spilling out.

The transformation, beginning before dawn, engulfed the entire hospital in under an hour. Eight hundred souls—staff, and patients ranging from mild to terminal—descended into a screaming, chaotic living hell.

Beyond the confines of their cells, the sickening joy of rending flesh, the shrieks of people dissolving, and the raw, clawing pleas for help all bled together into one ghastly symphony. The quiet contentment I'd been sitting with only yesterday—having finally worked up the nerve to send a letter home to my family—was utterly consumed by the new reality now bearing down around me.

If I strained my ears hard enough, I could just about pick out the screaming of my doctor, someone I'd actually grown rather fond of.

"No, no! Help me, help me! Why, why, why?! It's a lie, it has to be!"

Ever the meddling bystander, I couldn't help but take issue with his uninspired choice of words. Wasn't the richness of its vocabulary supposed to be Japanese's selling point?

"Yes, hello? Oh, me? I'm in my room, as you can see. Still waiting for breakfast."

The external line chirped to life, cutting through the cacophony of screams and blaring fire alarms. I picked up.

I resided in Ward D, the sector reserved for the utterly hopeless. Its tight security and labyrinthine layout meant that the bulk of the riot had yet to make its way to the patient rooms. From my window, I could only make out the distant screams of victims. Well, there was probably no one besides me in Ward D who could breach the thirty layers of steel needed to reach this far anyway.

"Yup, I know. I can hear them. You think I'm the only one sane enough to listen and stay put? Hmm, I dunno if I wanna do that. Everyone's been really nice to me, and I'm totally grateful for the princess treatment, but siding with the docs just isn't my thing, y'know? I mean, the only reason we've lasted this long is because our interests happened to line up."

So, the moment there was nothing left in it for me, the honeymoon period ended.

I peeled myself off the bed and rolled my shoulders until my joints popped with a soft, satisfying *crack*. The vice-director on the other end of the line proved quite the character; he merely chuckled, "Yeah, that's exactly what I love about you," stated his piece, and then abruptly severed the external line. He was, it seemed, abandoning his colleagues, scrambling to the helipad ahead of everyone else.

"Bah, this is exactly why you should never put your faith in shady non-profits. The higher up the food chain you go, the murkier and more rotten they get."

While I certainly had complaints, I felt no real anger toward the doctors.

They had, until now, so fiercely prioritised others' lives that I found myself unable to curse them for finally putting their own first in this crucial moment. Besides, his final parting gift actually made my heart skip a beat.

"Farewell. You monsters kill each other to your hearts' content!"

"Like I needed you to tell me that!"

Now, *that* was far more appealing than any lingering resentment toward the hospital. I crossed the patient room in a few brisk strides, a chamber as cavernous as a gymnasium.

"Alright. Let's do some spring cleaning, shall we?"

My palm found purchase on the steel door, a behemoth four metres high and three metres wide, befitting a room built to house a monster.

"Ready—"

I felt my tongue dart out, an indelicate, instinctive lick of my lips. I would've definitely gotten beet-red on the spot if the cameras caught that, but then again, there was no conceivable way my family would ever see this footage.

"—Go!"

With a wet *squelch*, I tore open the steel door and burst into the hallway. I couldn't afford to slow down now that I'd gotten a move on. After all, the biggest of problems always seemed to resolve themselves before the person in question arrived to do something about it.

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And just like that, my operation of mass bloodshed began.

As I stepped out of the section of the hospital custom-built specifically for me, I found myself greeted by a picturesque image of hell.

The Ward D corridors had no windows and were sectioned like dice, designed to disorient you after just a few steps—a clear measure, no doubt, to prevent patients

from finding their way out. As I plunged through the maze, wondering where to even begin, I ran right into my first encounter.

“Well, hello there.”

“Gah.”

I quickly subdued the rude D-Rank patient who responded with a grunt.

Gah? Couldn't you come up with a better response for a young damsel?

Swallowing my indignation, I managed to get directions to the nearby room before snapping his collarbone. Thus, I continued my brisk rounds, moving from one patient to the next.

Was I a doctor? In a way, perhaps.

For when everything was over, only the objective truth would remain.

So, onto the next patient.

It wasn't a clean sweep, though. While C-Rank patients who wandered into Ward D proved easily manageable, the D-Rank opponents were a genuine challenge.

Each D-Rank patient's condition was uniquely extreme.

There was the man who, after attempting to retrieve his sold organs, ended up buried under a proliferating mass of them. Or the one so terrified of his neighbours deteriorating that he froze not only them but also himself and the surrounding time. And then there was the boy, born unable to consume solids, who eventually liquefied and began to consume all living things.

As you can see, they were quite the colourful bunch.

Our illness was a strange one: to overcome our psychological trauma, we would either create new physical functions or transform ourselves entirely.

For example, a patient who developed this disease due to bulimia might find their overeating resolved by their stomach and intestines grotesquely enlarging.

In essence, it was a bizarre condition where the body attempted to compensate for emotional wounds without actually healing them. D-Rank patients were those who were already too far gone, their symptoms nudging them just past the edges of humanity.

And me? Of course, I was no different. Just as terminally ill as the rest.

My transformation hadn't stopped; my body was still shifting minute by minute, pulling further away from who I used to be.

"But this isn't what they promised. Doc claimed only three of us could move..."

I'd been told that merely three D-Rank patients possessed the capacity for independent action: myself, Hirumiya, and Kuramitsu.

The other forty, I was assured, weren't in a state to leave their chambers. Yet that rude man from before and the boy I'd observed toying with the guards in the monitoring room—they were both roaming free without a care in the world.

"...This is a problem. It'd be a shame to have such rare conditions just die off elsewhere."

Thus, I made my rounds through the rooms as briskly yet efficiently as I could.

Every single one needed to be savoured inside me; it would be such a waste otherwise.

This was an ultimate showdown. A survival competition driven by pride. We were outcasts looked down upon by society, but that was precisely why this moment was everything to us.

"Well, not that I don't already know how things will end."

This whole process was just a matter of confirming what I already knew. For someone who'd spent so much time idling in her hospital room, the idea itself wasn't too appealing.

My true desires called from elsewhere; this wasn't the actual goal.

So I had to hurry. This massacre was just for the sake of passing the time. And besides, I wouldn't be allowed to leave this hospital until every patient was dealt with.

"Hmm, which rooms haven't I checked yet..."

I pulled up the hospital map I'd committed to memory from the security room. A red light pulsed in my mind. The final unchecked room, 404, was the furthest from Ward C.

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I confirmed the room number and rapped on the steel door.

Knock, knock, knock.

“Excuse me! Just following procedure, but I have to ask: do you have any will to survive?”

Knock, knock, knock.

No response.

I peered through the peephole, but the room was pitch black. Only the number 404 stood out. It was long past its expiration date—file not found.

I couldn’t discern the faintest detail inside.

The hallway remained perfectly bright, so perhaps only this room had suffered a power outage. If that was the case, I’d have to force the electronic lock open.

Knock, knock, knock, clang, clatter.

“Helloooo? You don’t have to answer me... but I’m gonna assume you’re cool with me smashing this entire room, ’kay?”

My stance shifted from a light knock to one poised to unleash a full-force punch.

Bzzzt! The intercom suddenly crackled to life.

“It’s futile. Leave at once. No one can defeat me.”

A machine voice!

And what was with that cool catch phrase?! Only a final boss-tier character could pull off something like that!

“A hit?! Jackpot! I really wasn’t expecting much, but you sound super strong!”

Clang, clang, clang, clang!

Overjoyed, I wildly hammered at the spear-shaped door. The steel door, less than ten centimetres thick—the same as those on the other rooms—would surely give way with ease.

“Mhm... you’ve got no intention of coming out, do you? Didn’t think so. But sitting still and playing nice is the last thing you’d ever do, right? You’d never ask me to protect you, even if it’s the last thing you ever said, would you?”

Because if they *did* utter such words, I’d be forced to let them go. Things’d get complicated if the D-Rank patients didn’t at least show some resistance.

“Hey, is that a yes? I’m coming in, okay?”

“Stop. Do not enter. My power is too much for you. Only regret will await you within.”

God, he was just getting me way too excited!

Blam! Blam! Blam! Crunch! Crunch! Crunch! Clang! Clang! Clang! Clang! Clang!

My limbs were fully engaged, punching and kicking at that tiny door like a woman possessed.

Like all the other steel doors, the one to Room 404 should have already been irrevocably torn to shreds by... now?

“Huh?”

Something was seriously off about this room, wasn’t it? There wasn’t a single scratch on it, let alone any signs of warping.

Inside lay absolute darkness, utterly devoid of light.

Come to think of it, my infrared vision was supposed to be perfect for the darkness, and the intercom was still working even though the power had gone out long ago.

“This is a warning for your own good. If you value your life, do not enter my world.”

“...Well, well.”

My hand reached for the sliding doorknob, and the corner of my lip curved into a wicked, predatory grin. Any minor questions I’d had simply vanished, drowned out by that condescending challenge.

I couldn’t win? Me? I’d stop if I valued my life?

Hilarious.

Actually, it was straight up touching.

No one had earnestly feared for my well-being like that in the past two years.

“Fine then, try me if you can!”

Giving up on trying to break the door, I forced it to slide open. Beyond it was a wall of absolute darkness. My eyes gleaming with excitement, I stepped into the room without a shred of fear.

“...Huh?”

My brain, which had been alight with the desire to kill the owner of that machine voice, instantly froze. The murderous fervour that had made my heart pound was nothing but dust here. After just a single second of realisation...

“I told you. You shouldn’t have entered my cosmos.”

I was, quite literally, hurled outside of the planet.



Depending on who you ask, what constitutes a cosmos differs, so I can’t really get into its definitions or properties. Humans can only perceive what their five senses tell them, after all. Space is weightless, airless, bitterly cold, and an unimaginably vast ocean of light: the entire sky blanketed in stars.

Planets glowing with all sorts of brilliance.

Stars that make Earth’s sun look tiny.

Galaxies, those collections of stars, are distant, sure, but thousands of times closer than when you look up from Earth. So close, in fact, you could almost reach out and touch them.

“.....”

I gasped, overwhelmed by the dazzling brilliance and its profound depth.

This was a world of gods.

Not a place for a lone human to exist, exposed and vulnerable. Maybe this was the very nature of a star’s loneliness. A human mind simply couldn’t endure the reality of floating by itself in this light-filled darkness.

“.....”

Somehow, the sheer vastness felt constricting. This suffocating feeling, like being locked in a tiny, five-tatami-mat room, was because of—

“Oxygen!”

I finally snapped out of my cosmic awe. Sure, I’d been in incinerators and freezers before, but I’d never experienced a vacuum!

My eyeballs tingled. I felt heat rapidly escaping from the watery parts of my body.

“W-Whoa... umm!”

Was I supposed to hold my breath?!

“Ugahh!”

No, wait, that’s wrong! It’s the opposite! Holding my breath would make the air in my lungs solidify! My body wouldn’t explode from pressure differences, nor would my limbs freeze from the cold, but if my blood vessels were clogged, my brain would be toast!

Turns out, I had to keep exhaling or I’d be a goner. But then my oxygen would only last ten seconds! And my brain would run out of oxygen if I risked inhaling in a vacuum, which would only make me even *more* dead!

“Ah... no, wait a se—!”

In short, I was completely screwed.

I died in about twenty seconds, my corpse floating through that impossibly vast stretch of space.

“...Tch. Made it again.”

And three seconds later, I snapped my eyes open, fully revived.

This disease that made me unkillable had apparently conquered the vacuum of space itself. My first taste of the cosmos was a touch chilly, oddly floaty, and, for reasons beyond me, my own voice echoed in the void.

It felt so pathetic that I would have rather not, but I tried crawling just to see what’d happen. Holy cow, I actually moved! Smoother than swimming through water, too—almost cosy. Now, whether *I* was the absurd one or this universe was just nonsense, I’ll leave that hanging.

“W-W-W-What the—?!”

A cloyingly sweet, syrupy male voice sloshed through the fake vacuum.

“...What was that?”

Whoosh, whoosh, whoosh.

From my six o’clock, something bizarre hurtled through the starry void. It was, without a doubt, a single tatami mat.

“Whoaaaa! It’s a girl!”

Perched atop it was a figure that, no matter how you sliced it, could only be described as a snowman—a lumbering, obese blob of a man.

The hospital room had morphed into a sprawling universe.

And a UFO, gliding like some magic carpet, carried this plump guy, cross-legged and smug, looking well past thirty.

“Un-freaking-believable! This one’s got little sister vibes to the max! Wait, hold up! How are you even alive? You’re not breathing, are you? Are you, like, a polygon model? Eh, whatever! Boobs, limbs, face, voice, hair, butt, and—did I mention boobs? That’s a strike in my book! Hell, you could be a star and I’d still be game!”

I grimaced. The snowman was frolicking around like some giddy high school girl from a bygone era.

And that, folks, was my grand introduction to Ookumaneko Mokumoku, also known as the Galaxy’s Strongest NEET. And just so you know, I own the copyright to that nickname.

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“Man, that black hair’s gorgeous! And it’s long enough to drape down your back! Undyed, too? That’s a big win! Oh, damn, I’m blushing! I might just fall head over heels for you! Dahaha!” he cackled, a snowman-shaped daifuku zipping around me on his tatami mat.

This was Ookumaneko Mokumoku, one of D-Ward's old-timers. Rumour had it even the doctors had never seen him in the flesh. All they knew was his idiotic name, his age, and his utterly pathetic reason for admission.

"So *you're* the rumoured shut-in? The deadbeat who spent countless more years pissing his life away ever since he was eight?"

Can I just kill him?

"Yup, that's me! But calling me a deadbeat just 'cause I'm a shut-in? Not cool at all! Holing up, hibernating—that's survival smarts, pure and simple! How many times do I gotta spell it out? I won't let you say badgers don't have rights!"

Badgers don't get human rights, pal.

"Wait, hold up—my apologies, let's calm down. First guest ever, so I got a bit too excited. ...Okay, that's a lie. I'm still excited as hell! Your outfit's just too damn sexy!"

The obese blob zipped through space on his UFO.

"Whew! Busting out top and bottom! What's that, a sports bra? Spats? Did you just roll out of bed, meow? Or straight from the gym? Ugh, damn it! It's too dark to see anything properly!"

I silently attempted to predict his UFO's path.

Next time he swung to my upper left, it'd be over for him.

A mere fist wouldn't suffice. A full-force right high kick would split that overstuffed body clean in half.

"Oh, come on... Hey, Ero-Manga Island Cluster, hit me with some light from Q direction! Nice, good angle! But I wanna see more armpit, meow! Yo, Ecole Star, swing to the bottom left and flash!"

"Huh?!"

A blinding spotlight? A satellite, tucked behind a large planet until now, popped out, reflecting sunlight. Caught in the perfectly aimed beam, I instinctively squeezed my eyes shut.

"Gyaaaaahhhh?!"

Well, I still landed that high kick square on him.

Chunks of flesh drifted through the glittering, silver-foil cosmos.

The shut-in, who'd burst in and done whatever he damn well pleased, vanished like cosmic vapour.

"Juuuuust kidding! No effect whatsoever!"

"Huh?!"

W-W-W-What's going on?!

I know I kicked him—smashed him good—so why's that pork bun zipping around with a grin plastered on his face?! That wasn't just speed or regeneration. That was something else entirely!

"Y-You little—!"

I swung my lethal high kick, wild and furious.

"Whoo! Those legs are looong! Badass!"

The mystery panda pranced around me, giddy as hell. He was pissing me off so bad that I wanted to just annihilate him without a word, but...

"Take this! This! THIS!"

My attacks didn't land. Didn't even graze him. To think... that I... could be toyed with... by some fat pelican-like slob!

"Hey, what the heck is going on?!"

"Hehehe, I really wonder, meow!" Ookumaneko smirked, framed by a distant star cluster.

I drove my foot into his potbelly—nothing. No damage. It made no sense. I was hitting him, so why wasn't it working?!

"Whoa, that was close! And thus, yours truly slips behind you. Yowza, that waist's so tiiiiny! I love it!"

Compared to you, sure!

"Hot damn, those legs! Lewddddd! Like a creature crafted solely to corrupt men!"

Ha! I'm nothing compared to your sheer depravity!

"Too bad, though! You're a college girl, aren't ya? I've got no interest in old ladies!"

All right.

“Die! Right now!”

“Hahaha, no way!”

I aimed a killer kick at his philtrum, meaning to shatter his face and skull. Useless, just like before. I hated to admit it, but I had to. No clue how, but this guy seemed physically unrivalled. That aside...

“Just so you know, I’m seventeen this year.”

Factual errors needed correcting.

“Huh? For real? No way, you’re too... developed for that! But, I see, that must be your illness. My bad, then. To make up for it, I’ll let you in on one of my secrets. What do you wanna know?”

“Tell me how to kill you.”

“Haha, talk about direct! But that’s a no-go. I don’t even know the answer to that myself. See, as long as I’m in this universe, no matter what’s done to me, its rules won’t allow my destruction.”

“What the hell? You’re saying you’re unrivalled as long as you’re in here?”

“Hmm? Oh, that’s a great way to put it! Unrivalled? That I am indeed! How do I explain this? To this universe, I’m just... irrelevant. I don’t matter, don’t connect to anything, don’t register as a target. Truly, utterly insignificant. So, there’s not even a single Planck’s worth of energy spent on me. And since you’ve stepped into this universe, the same rule applies to you. No attack in this universe can perceive me as its target. I’m not your enemy, see? I wasn’t talking about strength at all. I’m unrivalled because I don’t have any foes in the first place.”

“Huh?”

What’s with this guy? I thought he was just a NEET, but is he some full-on delusional weirdo?

“...Enough with the nonsense. So, basically, you don’t have a hitbox?”

“More like I don’t exist within the laws of causality. That’s why I can’t be killed. And I can’t kill you either. We’re at a perfect stalemate, you and I.”

“.....”

So, in short, I drew the worst possible lot. Whether Ookumaneko's claims were true or not, one thing was clear: I couldn't kill this guy.

"Hm? Where you headed? That way's dangerous—triple black hole territory. Worth a peek, sure, but it's not exactly rare."

"Do whatever you want. I don't know what kind of trick this is, but I'm not playing along. I don't have time to waste with some annoying side character like—"

...Wait. I came in from that direction, didn't I?

Hold on, hold on, hold on—huh?

"Hey. Where's the exit?"

A truth I didn't want to face.

A creeping dread crawled up my spine as I called out to the lump of flesh behind me.

And sure enough, the panda on the tatami mat responded: "Sorry, can't help with that either. There *is* no exit. You're stuck here, even if you die. Swear to God, there ain't nothing I can do about this. Ugh, man. I told you not to come in, didn't I?"

"What the hell are you talking about?! No way I'm buying that! This is your illness, isn't it?!"

"And there's your answer. I'm in here because my illness is incurable. Don't say I didn't warn you. Ugh, man. I told you not to come in, didn't I? That's, like, take two."

"You! Get me out of here, you damn panda!"

"Hahaha, no way!"

Whoosh—his UFO darted off like a white comet.

"Hey, wait! Tell me something actually useful!"

No way I'd let him escape. I kicked through the void, frantic.

—And then, I had a realisation.

Wait, this is faster than swimming, isn't it?

"What's that?! A navigation method faster than my tatami just emerged within this universe?! Unreal! Absolutely unreal what the concept of a gorgeous gal can achieve! Oh, you're a dangerous one, alright! Mostly that body of yours! But, look, I

don't care about the other stuff. The title of fastest in the cosmos? That's mine. Guess you'll have to disappear here!"

And with that, Ookumaneko struck a pompous pose on his tatami, all high and mighty.

"What? Weren't we supposed to be non-interfering?"

I chased the fleeing NEET at full speed. Here, hopping rhythmically felt better than running. Kicking through the void, I looked like a jet skimming the water's surface.

"Ha! You idiot! The laws of this universe bend to my will! Take this! Meteor Fall! ...Just kidding! Can't actually make a meteor come crashing down!"

"Heh. Knew it."

Thwack.

A comet slammed right into my face.

"Wha? It worked?!"

"Just knowin' the stars' orbits! But, man, that was scary as hell! You just proved you're tougher than Earth in this universe! Hope you get that!"

Ookumaneko, still hyped, zipped through the galactic reef, the asteroid belt, like it was nothing.

"....."

Suddenly, it all felt so hollow. If I calmed down and thought about it, this whole situation was too absurd to take seriously.

"Hm? What, our game of tag's over already? There's a stellar spot over that way, where the stars look like a river. I call it the Honey Way."

"That's just a rip-off of the Milky Way," I sighed, turning on my heel.

I didn't have time to chase some overfed thirty-something.

My goal was elsewhere. If I got back to the zone I came from and started smashing everything, maybe I'd get out of this room.

"Give it up. I told you, once you're in, you're not getting out."

"Shut up. No way I'm getting stuck in a place like this."

"Geez, so prickly! Got something urgent to handle or something?"

The single-tatami panda floated around me, bobbing lightly.

“Yeah, I do. So die already. If you croak, this room goes back to normal, right?”

I strode forward, a tiny solar system beneath my feet, tossing the words over my shoulder. I didn’t know the details of Ookumaneko’s condition, but it shouldn’t be different from the other patients. The diseases this illness caused—once the patient died, reality would snap back.

“Oh, probably. Yeah, if I vanish, that’d fix it.”

“Then die. You’ve got nothing better to do anyway, right? If you’re gonna be a shut-in, do it in the afterlife.”

“Harsh! But hold on a sec. Look over there at those twin stars. Rare in this universe—they’ve got some spiritual vibe. Been glaring at each other for nearly a century now. Ended up starting a war over limited thought resources. Kinda sad, right? Don’t we gotta help ’em out?”

“Take that high-and-mighty crap somewhere else. What I’ve got to deal with is—”

My family’s problems.

In this utterly ridiculous situation, I let that slip without thinking.

Ookumaneko blinked, eyes wide. “Hm?”

“Sorry my scale’s so small,” I muttered, cheeks burning with shame as I quickened my pace to hide it.

He spun his tatami sideways in a full roll, stopped floating so casually, and muttered, “Yeah, that’s a big deal, alright.” His flight path suddenly turned sharp and straight. “So, how ’bout a break? Getting all worked up just wears you out. Why not go for a cosmic cruise with me? I don’t know where the exit is, but I can at least give you the grand tour of this universe!”

I stopped dead. Part of me wanted to snap, “Shut up, die,” but he had a point. Raging alone wasn’t going to crack this situation. For once, I listened to someone else.

...If I’m being honest, though, it was partly because his gesture just now reminded me a little of my family.

Now that I'd made up my mind, it was time to get chatting.

I wasn't thrilled about it, but I needed to carve out a rest stop in this mess.

"Hey, could you scoot over a bit? Standing's getting tiring."

"What's that, meow?"

I pointed at the floating tatami; Ookumaneko pointed at himself, his face a flustered mess, clearly not used to girls.

"Not you, that. The tatami. Squeeze over, and it can fit two, right?"

"W-Well, of course it can fit two! You sure? Really sure? Tandem riding? You falling for my sweet machine or what?"

"It's not like I have a choice. There's no bench or anything else around."

"No wayyy, for reaaaal?! Whoaaaa, what's with this plot twist?! Man, it pays to muster up the courage and invite a girl out! Alright, use the left half! A beauty like you? No diplomatic incidents here!"

"Thanks. I don't feel grateful in the slightest, but I guess I can humour you a little."

With a curt nod, I sat beside him. The tatami's owner flinched, scooting a centimetre to the right.

"Whew, talk about close quarters! One sharp brake and our shoulders might touch! Isn't that crazy?! Can I hope for a full-on ice-age-level collision?!"

"Keep hoping, and I'll make it rain blood. Also, does this tatami just straight up ignore the rules of inertia or something?"

"Yow, that's cold! No pillow talk vibes at all! But that attitude'll change soon enough, you'll see!"

Gleeful as ever, Ookumaneko cranked up the tatami's speed. It seems he was serious about giving me the cosmic tour.

"Let's check out a couple of well-made solar systems. Hmm, kinda basic, but how about a planet with a glass surface? Pretty romantic, right? Unfortunately, the flatness means every critter's got tyres for feet, but that's just something you gotta learn to love."

The tatami's bow seemed to be on the right side, where he sat. With a bored glance, he steered the cosmic ship toward a distant solar system.

↓

The view was a 360-degree sea of stars.

There's no denying that it was quite the romantic situation.

Then again, that was only because I'm what you'd call a sick freak. A normal person couldn't handle this loneliness. It was like being tossed into the night sea, yet clinging to a single plank. No matter how grand the scenery before them, humans would rather shut their eyes if their safety wasn't guaranteed.

"Hmm, two riders *does* make it feel roomier. Maybe your cognition added some space. It'll take a bit longer, so feel free to fire any questions you've got. Like, my hobbies, my favourite books, my ideal girl type, y'know?"

"Let's start by having you explain all this."

"Hm? Think of it as my own universe. Can't you tell?"

"I can *see* that. I'm asking how it ended up like this. I've seen lots of similar patients, but this is an all-new level of deranged."

"Is it? I thought Yashikido was way worse. Well, he was the only one around when I first arrived, so it's not like I know anyone else."

"Yashikido? I killed him earlier. What, old friend of yours?"

"We talked once over the phone, back when we were both B-Rank. Our conditions were, y'know, pretty standard back then. We even bet on who'd die first."

"My bad. Guess Yashikido won that one."

"Who knows?" Ookumaneko chuckled, amused.

A glance over my shoulder caught his eyes—surprisingly gentle. Up close, the corners of his eyes had a soft, kind look.

"So, how'd this happen?"

"Nothing crazy. Just kept shutting myself in, and somehow my room turned into a universe. Lived without seeing anyone, and the room got darker and darker.

Next thing I know, I'm floating in space, y'know? Man, what a hassle," he muttered, crossing his arms.

Waking up alone in the middle of a universe—yeah, that'd be a problem.

"Hmm. So you sought escape in your surroundings, not within yourself. That's why this transformation happened. Which means you *are* the one who made this place."

"If we're talking about kickstarting it, I guess so. But it's a bit more complicated than that. Real or fantasy, this place has been established as a universe. Sorry to say, but you were doomed from the second you ended up in here. You're already outside the planet you lived in. Not much chance of escape when you're already out, after all."

I had entered Room 404.

Inside was a locked room.

To get back to reality, I'd need to leave Room 404—but its interior was the cosmos that lied beyond the confines of earth. And so, the concept of 'getting out' didn't apply to escaping this space.

"That's why you told me not to come in, huh? What a terrible warning. You could've tried harder."

"Sorry, that was all I could get across. Words don't travel well—my universe is just too far," he smirked, stroking his double chin with a dramatic flair.

"Ugh, cringe. ...So, how many people have fallen victim to this room?"

"Who knows? Ten or so? Everyone who came for a check-up died the moment they stepped in! You showing up, still alive and kicking? Talk about a cosmic joke! If I'd known this day would come, I'd have built a universe-sized diner or something!"

"Well, whatever. I for one think this might be the worst day of my life. So anyway, you said this was the outside, but does that mean it stretches on infinitely? Won't I end up outside the room if I venture beyond the cosmos?"

"Hmm, hard to say. I do remember finding some sort of wall back then. But given that it's a universe, it hasn't stopped expanding since the moment it was born. No matter how you try to navigate it, you're never outrunning its growth."

“So, you’re saying there’s no way to escape beyond the cosmos?”

“That’s the limit of four-dimensional spacetime, after all. Guess we’re stuck being Adam and Eve here! Whoa, hold up! I sense some black-hole-grade killing intent swirling behind me!”

“It’s all *your* fault! Why’d you even wish for something as stupid as an expanding universe? If you’re gonna be a shut-in, just stick to a five-and-a-half-tatami room!”

“Look, that part’s not up to me. A universe is a living thing. It’s born, expands, contracts, and someday dies. Expanding is kinda like the bare minimum for something to be a universe. The only thing I can do is observe it. Just like this.”

“And yet, you act more like a ruler than an observer.”

“Anyone’s capable of observing it in the same way as me. It’s no different from looking at bacteria through a microscope. Just the micro and macro flipped.”

“Hm? So a tiny thing’s watching something huge?”

“I suppose so. Or maybe a slightly bigger us is watching this tiny universe. It might be the smallest thing, but by universe standards, it’s still vast to us.”

...Whatever. Either way, we were just insignificant specks. Pointless.

“Your nonsense doesn’t change anything. You’re no different from the other patients. How long have you been wasting your life on this crap?”

“Harsh! If you try to grade a shut-in’s lazy time, all that’ll be left is bones! You telling me to lose weight?!”

“Knock yourself out.”

“Hmm, in outside time—your reality till just now—maybe over ten years? By the way, got any news on the discussions going on outside? Big Crunch still a minority view? Any Dark Flow discoveries yet?”

He breezed past it like it was nothing. Maybe the concept of losing weight didn’t even exist in this guy’s being.

“Whatever. Lazy, fat, miserable—who cares! It’s just us here. Looks don’t matter! Though, you’d be cuter if you acted a bit more your age. Such a waste. Why’d you have to age up like that?”

“Die!”

Wham—a lightspeed spearhand cracked against the back of his panda skull.

And yeah, in this universe, lightspeed's no metaphor—it's real.

A fist my size at that speed could blow Earth away, but the fat lump in front of me didn't even flinch.

"Gh... This guy... are you fresh-baked pudding or what?!"

Unrivalled. Truly unrivalled. The plan to kill this NEET and reset the room regrettably seemed like it'd be a no-go.

"Hahaha, calling me squishy so indirectly makes me blush, meow! Oh, we're almost there. Look, girl, feast your eyes and cheer up. Over there is a solar system crowned with a sun about three times the mass of yours. As far as I know, it's the celestial body most similar to the universe you came from."

"Hah? Why are you acting all gentlemanly all of a sud—"

I was at a loss for breath.

Eyes opened wide, trying to etch this light into eternity.

There it was—a perfectly crafted model. Planets orbiting in harmony around a sun. A shape like the universe I'd been in, fulfilling the fantasy we dream of—a homeland and a frontier all at once.

"Pretty cool, huh? Seven coloured rings, the largest in the whole universe!"

"....."

Yeah, I thought, as tears slipped out unbidden.

It's true, this universe was beautiful. Even if it was a fake, and even if something was fatally warped, the mere fact that it was a universe at all was a miracle beyond human comprehension.

"But your existence is so irritating it kinda cancels it out."

"Why, I never!" he gasped, flopping dramatically on his tatami.

I couldn't quite put my finger on it, but talking to him left me deeply unsettled. It wasn't so much outright irritation as an unexplainable unease—the kind that made your armpits tingle and your nose sting with a strange, jittery discomfort.

At the same time, to my horror, I found myself becoming so inexplicably accepting, thinking, “Well, people like him exist, I guess.”

I hate what I hate, despise what I despise.

When I became aware of my own illness, I carved a new rule into my book: never put up with anything again. And yet, here I was.

“Hey, see that planet that kinda looks like Earth? Does it have people?”

“Oh, sure. Our only similarities are that they walk on two legs, have two hands, and rely on language to, y’know, get by. They’re about five thousand times more introverted than we are, though.”

“...For a fake, this is ridiculously elaborate. Is this meant to be a copy of our universe?”

“Absolutely not! As if a perfect, axiomatic copy of an existing model universe could be created in just ten years! The baseline might be the same, but the fundamentals are pure gibberish. Above all, this universe contains neither hatred nor sorrow. This is a place without conflict—it’s the Mokumoku universe, after all!”

His droopy panda eyes sparkled with radiant compassion. The sight was absurdly convincing.

“Well, that’s prob—”

I caught myself mid-agreement, stunned.

What was that? So fishy, so sanctimonious, so infuriating! Why was I starting to nod along like some sap?!

“No, but...”

Saying it’s absurd, getting mad and denying everything would be the real absurdity. Maybe I should just let it all slide.

I mean, his illness, his profile, escaping this universe, my own goals... none of it was worth a single yen. This was all just a story I could forget with a laugh, right? I could practically feel my chakra opening with a goofy grin!

“Whoa, hold up, hold up, hold up! Scratch that, none of this is fun at all!”

This was bad! The hatred in my heart was being cleansed at an alarming rate!

“It’s fine, dear girl. You don’t need to enjoy it. You don’t need to work either. As long as we can be shut-ins together, that’s all that matters.” Ookumaneko shone brightly, his face set in a timeless, archaic smile.

Hold on, that glow is just the sun behind him! What a total fraud!

“Whoaaaa, this is nuts! Everything’s so tiny in this universe that it makes all conflict seem measly!”

“Hahahahahahaha! A god I am!”

He scrawled ‘god’ on his palm and struck a Buddha pose, glowing like a Shigaraki statue.

“Shut it, you fat blob! What kind of god looks like a giant daifuku?!”

Even though I knew he was unassailable, I instinctively stood up and lifted my leg. My full-force mid-level roundhouse kick, powered by my pivot foot, passed right through his body again. ...*Wait, what?*

“Whoa—!”

The over-150-kilo shut-in was sent flying from the tatami mat, vanishing with a glint into the sun.

“...Did he survive that?”

For the first time in my life, I felt a pang of guilt.

That was, I’d admit, one hell of a roast.



“I’m back!”

Ookumaneko Mokumoku bounced back with a *boing*, unscathed.

Zero damage. He scratched his triple-layered gut as he yawned sleepily.

“...Well, I figured that would happen.”

“Haha, don’t look so glum, girl! Back outside, you might’ve been the planet’s toughest badass, but that stuff doesn’t work so well here! Still, making contact is a huge step forward! Y’know, in a romantic, touchy-feely sense!”

He puffed out his cheeks like a pufferfish, clearly aiming for a cynical grin.

“Gross.”

Whoosh—my roundhouse kick whiffed. Was that last hit a lucky angle, pure grit, or some cosmic miracle?

“Well, stick around long enough, and stuff like that happens. That hit might’ve been a fluke, just a brief moment where our perceptions lined up.”

“So timing’s the key?”

“Yup! Basically, you couldn’t hold back your sadistic affection for me, and I couldn’t resist the twisted thrill of being your punching bag. The laws of the universe just leaned into that messed-up vibe! A true miracle of love!”

“Love, huh? Guess it’s never happening again, then.”

“Cold as ice! One kick and you’re back to your old self! For a moment there, you were so sweet and age-appropriate... what a shame.”

The Shigaraki statue feigned disappointment but settled firmly on the right side of the tatami mat.

The tiny spaceship’s territory was cleanly divided, with no border violations so far. This one-tatami world floating in space, just as Ookumaneko claimed, had no conflict.

—*Ouch. Ouch! Ow, ow, ow!*

“Hey, something just hit my shoulder! Was that a hammer?! Are you sure you’re not secretly the only one who can break the rules of this universe?!”

“What?! I mean, you’re crazy strong, so maybe you could actually pull it off, but there’s no need for—”

His dramatic shock was cut short as an unidentified attack exploded at his feet. A small gust of wind and a tremor.

I looked toward the source and saw—what looked like a spaceship—a floating pinecone.

“Wait... what?!”

Correction: three gigantic pinecone-shaped satellites, each about 3,000 kilometres in diameter, were attacking the tatami mat.

For reference, the moon’s diameter is 3,476 kilometres. They were coming from a distance of 50 million kilometres.

An attack from that far away? Even *I* was freaked out.

“Beams! Those guys are shooting beams at us, aren’t they?!”

“My, what a strange turn of events! We’ve been spotted! I bet they saw one of us when I was launched into the sun a minute ago!”

“Hah?! That was just a minute ago?! How are they so fast?!”

“For that solar system, it’s been centuries! C’mon, grab on! We’re getting outta here! I’ll be fine, but you’ll get dragged into their rules!”

The mysterious beams kept raining down. Yeah, they looked like they’d hurt.

“I agree, but how often does this kinda stuff happen?!”

“Hm? Um, well, more often than you showing up. Let’s see... it’s about as common as the characters from a novel you wrote showing up to kill you.”

“Then that’s just flat-out impossible!”

Boom, boom, boom.

The pinecone fleet carved through the blue cosmic stream, zeroing in on us. Ugh, one just grazed us—a massive space torpedo, big enough to crack Jupiter!

“Whew! Just like the Galaxy Express!”

“No way in hell you’re ever becoming Tetsuro!”

Our tatami ship fled, barely outpacing the fleet. For some reason, Ookumaneko looked like he was having the time of his life.

“Wait, you said this universe has no conflict! So why are we getting attacked?!”

“It’s for their survival. They don’t have concepts of good or evil, no individual emotions. It’s just a defensive reflex, like a program correcting an error. It’s not a fight to live, not in the way you mean it. See, conflict, fighting, and survival are all core definitions of life. But your idea of ‘conflict’ seems to be all about personal, emotional struggles. Being that selfish isn’t a good look, you know?”

“Selfish?! There’s nothing wrong with putting yourself first, doofus! Besides, you’re the origin of this universe, aren’t you? What kind of idiotic god would get taken out by his own creations? If the characters in a novel rebelled, every single novelist in the world would be dead!”

“No way. Creators aren’t unbeatable. I’ve got no right to act like a god just ’cause I exist in a different dimension. In my time, we hadn’t reached that point,

but in yours, isn't most of society run by software? If numbers and symbols are propping up your world, *you* guys might end up being the obsolete ones."

"Talk about a load of bull. Sure, Excel's handy, but it's nothing without hardware. It can't exist without a container. AIs taking over humans is the most tired cliché in the book!"

"That belief of yours is outdated. You don't need a physical shell to run intelligence. In fact, having one would be a waste of resources. If we think about it in terms of the universe's total energy, clinging to forms bound by physical laws is pointless. In terms of energy efficiency, beings made purely of information—like them—are far superior to you."

"Them? Wait, are those one-dimensional beings?!"

"In your terms, maybe. Again, it's a matter of micro and macro. When a program gets layered, parallelised, and becomes perfectly consistent, life emerges. And once it's alive... after eons, it might turn its bow on the higher beings that made it. Gods, after all, are a waste of resources too."

"Ugh, they merged! They're glowing so bright the universe is turning white! Isn't this bad? Like, aren't we screwed?!"

"Indeed, creators can certainly be toppled. Even if I made this universe. Even if someone made yours. The created have the freedom to surpass their frame."

"Why on earth are you so calm?! This isn't someone else's problem! You're about to get taken out, like, right now!"

"Just a figure of speech. I'm nothing, not even a creator. And... yes! We've hooked a rope to a nice, hefty planet! A gravity catapult, huh? Pretty retro boost!"

The panda captain's mood flipped from a philosophical lecture to a cheerful shout as he steered toward a planet below.

"Here we go! Don't get flung off!"

Vroom—the tatami ship arced, accelerating wildly.

"Wait, we're gonna crash! What the hell are you doing?!"

"Isn't it obvious?!"

"Warp!"

Huh?



Of course, the warp failed spectacularly.

“Haha, yeah, figures! Now that I think about it, this thing doesn’t even have a function like that!”

“.....”

His cackling was obnoxiously loud.

We were drifting aimlessly through a silent, sunless void.

The mystery pinecone fleet had completely lost us.

The so-called ‘warp’ had been no spatial jump at all; it was just a reckless speed boost that sent us smashing toward a giant planet’s moon. The tatami mat pierced straight through to the other side.

As a result, the moon shielded us, deflecting the pinecone beams to the edge of the galaxy and allowing us to slip away in the chaos. Oh, and the pinecone fleet apparently burnt out with their final beam barrage.

You had to hand it to this universe—weapons designed to self-destruct are some next-level scale.

“No need to grieve, kind-hearted girl. They just converted their fleet’s energy into beams. I’m sure they’re back to being pinecones now... though, yeah, fewer of ’em, I bet!”

“I’m not grieving. Anyway, there’s something seriously wrong with you. You almost died, and you... aren’t even fazed. What’s up with that?”

“I can’t die, remember?! If that blast had erased anyone, it would’ve been you!”

“Then why’d you run? You could’ve ditched me and been done with it.”

“Nah, that would be a total waste! Sure, it’s just aimless wandering, but now it’s way more fun. Why? ’Cause I’ve got a stunning beauty by my side! So, how’s it looking? Starting to see me as your white knight yet?”

“.....”

I wonder if albino hippos exist on Earth?

...Anyway, I placed my palm on the tatami's boundary line and leaned my shoulder toward him, just a little.

"Whoa, b-border violation?!" he yelped, flinching back. "Am I finally getting my kiss of gratitude?"

As expected, the fat lump played it up but didn't dare touch me. He had no manly moves and was impossibly shy. Which meant...

"Hey. Are you a virgin 'cause you're a NEET? Or a NEET 'cause you're a virgin?"

Clearly, he wasn't used to girls.

"I'm gonna die of shock! Hold on, is my virginity already a foregone conclusion?! Isn't conversation supposed to be, like, a back-and-forth probe?"

"Don't care. So, which is it?"

"No way," he said, nodding sagely like he was spouting some grand truth. "Becoming a NEET makes you a virgin. It's like a reset."

"As a living being, doesn't saying that make you want to kill yourself?"

"Hahahahahaha! For the first time, I'm experiencing what it's like to plead for mercy from another! ...So *this* is killing intent. Calm down, my triple gut..." he trembled, muttering to himself, lost in his own monologue.

...I see. That concept of his must have been born way back when he was a child.

"Oh, an asteroid. And close. It's too late to dodge now."

As if he had sensors in every direction, Ookumaneko tilted his massive body, gently curving the tatami. At the same time, a two-thousand-kilometre-wide mass shot past us, a shooting star spewing gas like a geyser.

"....."

Just like that, the danger vanished as if it had never been there. I stood there, mouth open like a kid, just gawking at the miracle in front of me.

"Sorry for startling you. It looks like a small universe from a distance, but when you get involved in the events, it reverts to its true scale. That fleet earlier found us,

but even *they* were off by a little. This time, your sheer devilishness made me fumble the controls.”

“...It’s fine. It’s just... incredible.”

“Oh?” He glanced at the stars with bored, unimpressed eyes.

...Damn it.

I’d been optimistic, thinking this illness was just some trick. But it wasn’t. And it was time to admit that. Ookumaneko Mokumoku was a panda more formidable and troublesome than any patient I’d ever crushed. Utterly unrivalled.

He’d told me even a mere construct could be real.

And he was absolutely right.

It looked like some kid messing around, but its depths were unfathomable. This had become a problem no one could solve.

“...This is unbelievable. How can you be *this* alone? You’re in a place this incredible, and you haven’t done a single thing? Did you really want to be a shut-in that badly? You’re practically dead!”

“Hm? Is being alive really that important?”

“Not quite... it’s something that becomes important as you live, isn’t it?”

“Only if you have a reason to.”

“So, Ookumaneko, you’re saying you’ve got no reason to live? Then just die already. Like, right now.”

“Three counts of abuse! A princess’s order to off myself! Whew, I’m starting to get hooked on this!”

The spherical creature writhed with glee. I wanted to kick him but gave up; it was pointless. His gut looked all slimy and gross, anyway. Maybe his unrivalled nature was a stroke of luck, after all.

“But, y’know, it’s not that simple. Death’s a choice too. Just lacking a reason to live isn’t enough to die. That’s just human nature.”

“.....”

Another wave of inexplicable irritation hit me, and I clicked my tongue. This time, it wasn't just annoyance—a deep, scathing contempt burnt in my glare.

Ookumaneko's gentle eyes softened even more, and he smiled, "Yeah, that's about it. Go ahead, look down on me all you want! I've been like this for ten years straight!"

Since his illness manifested, he'd spent a decade in this universe. His whole room had been hauled to the hospital, so his shut-in years might have stretched even longer.

"Whoops, we're about to leave the asteroid's event range. It'll turn into a star soon, so if you like it, take a good look."

The meteor faded into the distance. After a blink, the rock-and-ice mass that filled my view shrank to a speck smaller than my fingernail.

Alone in this universe, all this time. Ookumaneko Mokumoku hadn't stepped outside since his illness began.

"Hey, you know that picture book Zathura?"

I blurted out a story I read long ago, out of the blue.

It was a tale of disaster that befell two ordinary brothers from an ordinary family—a story of cosmic drift not unlike our current mess.

One day, they'd started a board game they found in their attic, only to get flung into the galaxy drawn on its board. To return to Earth, they had to keep playing until they reached the end. But since it was a game, trouble was guaranteed. It was a deadly sugoroku packed with instant-death events. The numbers on the roulette wheel were pure chance, and the brothers were horrified by how a rule as childish as this could dominate their reality.

The brothers, who were optimistic at first, thinking they'd figure it out, slowly realised the cruelty of their plight. Pushed to their limits, the two started to clash, and the situation crept toward death with every passing moment.

The standout part for me was how one character was handled. The older brother, who got a "Wish!" card, thought for just a fleeting second that he wanted his

younger brother gone. The aftermath of that wish was that he ended up alone and eventually met a version of himself that was atoning for his sin.

I forgot the story's ending, but I remembered that it was a happy resolution, one fitting for a picture book.

"Oh, that's a loop story too."

Too?

"Life's basically a loop. Especially for me," Ookumaneko muttered to himself, his eyes distant as he gazed at the cosmos.

Every day, we wake in the morning and sleep at night.

On and off, on and off.

A series of routines for the pieces on the board who are deluded into thinking they're unique.

Birth, ageing, success, failure, marriage, and separation—it all comes down to a simple toss of a coin. From the universe's perspective, human life is just a loop. It's simply a matter of perspective, another micro-macro difference. Ageing and decline are not even worth measuring. For we live the same life every single day.

"I know a similar movie. Jumanji."

"Oh, same author."

"No way, really? I remember thinking that the folks who turned that brutal movie into a kids' story were nuts. I mean, they didn't have to spell out so bluntly that life is just a board game."

I knew Jumanji. It was a hit Western flick from '95, back when I was seven.

Ookumaneko, however, didn't seem to view it as a panic flick, a horror movie, or a family comedy; he took it as a documentary.

"Ugh, come on," he grumbled, and true to his name, the gesture was just a little adorable.

As Ookumaneko promised, his cosmos was so vast, so unfathomably deep, that the pinecone fleet's chaos slipped from my mind like a fleeting dream. It stretched on, unchanging, an endless expanse of sameness.

↓

"What are those Dala-like creatures? They're the dominant species on that planet?"

"Yeah, look at the surface. Waves as far as the eye can see. Walking there's a nightmare. It's evolution at work, much like Earth's horses. They had fingers once, you know, like us. But when the forests vanished, they shifted to plains, and fingers became useless for getting around. They didn't start with hooves—they honed themselves to kick the ground effectively."

"Huh. And the gas-choked sky means no birds ever took flight, right? Ugh, what's with that other planet? How is that penguin so monstrously huge?!"

"Whoa, bigger than a megalodon! A sea-born behemoth, a pseudo-penguin! See, penguins waddle ashore because they can't lay eggs underwater, right? These must've cracked that code, evolving into majestic ocean lords. They're cuter than whales, with that downright divine, plump belly curve!"

That giant penguin, however, vanished the moment I looked away.

Not because its species had declined, but because a massive meteor had smashed the planet half to bits. Pity the brainless beasts; unlike humans, they failed to devise a way to avoid their extinction.

In Ookumaneko's universe, planets hosting intelligent life were vanishingly rare.

"Alas, a civilisation's end!" he wailed, voice dripping with mock tragedy. "Is there no hope for penguin-kind anywhere?"

Could you even call a brainless ecosystem a civilisation?

“A world full of animals wouldn’t tinker with their planet like us humans, would they? A world still in its natural state could hardly be called a civilisation, no?”

“Nonsense. That’s a society in its own right. The most important parameter in life’s evolution is survival. An ecosystem honed purely for existence is civilisation enough. Those penguins might’ve reshaped their world for themselves.”

“You’re saying they can make tools even without intelligence?”

“Exactly. To give you a relatable example, think of an ant society. Humans just bet big on intelligence as their tool. You don’t *need* it to forge a civilisation; all it takes is the will to endure. Every living thing is bound to that impulse.”

My family always said: live first, purpose later. If the order gets flipped around, does that mean you’ve failed as a life form?

“Hah. You say they’re focused on survival, but all I’ve been seeing is extinction.”

“But not at their own hands. Their ends come from cosmic accidents or their natural conclusions as species. Extinction and self-destruction are two different beasts, after all.”

“Spoken like a know-it-all. So, what exactly makes a civilisation implode?”

“Never thought about it, really. But let’s see. Maybe one major factor is imagining something greater than themselves. Species with imagination tend to over- or underestimate themselves and their world. That warps their evolution, luring them into unseen traps.”

They imagine gods, in other words. For those of us with Agonist Disorder, the irony was too sharp to laugh at.

↓

How long had we been at this? Across countless hours, cycles, and fallen species, I was starting to lose all patience with this universe.

“Getting pricklier by the minute, aren’t you? Still not warming to this place?”

“Absurd. Warm to it? I’ve hated it from the start. I’m just about at my limit.”

Being caged here was bad enough, but what really grated at me was myself. Why was I still indulging this guy’s drivel?

“...Hey. How’d it start, how long’s it been, and how much of a freak do you think you are?”

“Oooh, fifty cosmic years in, and we’re finally talking like patients!”

With no fresh wonders to gape at, our talks slid into trivia. To bury my frustration, I slipped into the Agonist Disorder patient playbook—swapping profiles. My mistake.

“I’ve already spilt about my onset and admission, so that just leaves your last question. Honestly? Feels like I’m done for. But I’m way more curious about your weight, figure, and diet! Why do humans obsess over comparing their weight? Why do calories keep piling up? And do girls really get less popular if they’re a little chubby?”

“...If you’re cool with the fatality rate of guys who ask me that out here, I’ll clue you in. Also, I don’t eat meat.”

“What?! You?! You’re a natural-born carnivore, from head to toe! You don’t just eat—you look like you’d devour raw nutrition!”

“The best feasts are the ones you can only have once. I’ve got no desire to consume any other meat.”

“Oh? So you’ve already had that feast?”

“Obviously. That’s why I’m in this hospital. And I have no regrets. I’m still savouring the meal, after all. In fact, just to spite it, I’m not letting it be digested so easily.”

“Hmm...” he murmured, gazing into space, playing indifferent. He acted as if he hadn’t even realised that I was giving him my backstory. Maybe he wasn’t touching on my trauma out of courtesy. “Oh! Right, that ‘fatality rate’ bit was a pun on ‘fat,’ wasn’t it?! Sorry, I completely missed that! Phew, not the slickest, but it’s still funny as hell!”

“Shut it! If you’re gonna ignore something, ignore that too, you eco-panda!”

...Nope, it was my own foolish mistake. This blob had zero care for anyone else.

“What about your condition? I’ve seen your insane athleticism, but that doesn’t seem like the core abnormality. How the heck are you even surviving in outer space?”

Him asking that felt like a jellyfish at the beach coming up to me and asking why I couldn't reproduce asexually. It was downright insulting.

"I'm practically impossible to kill. Or, well, it's possible, but I bounce back right away. It's like I build immunity to whatever kills me. My strength is just a side-effect of that. Get shotgunned to death? Next shotgun won't faze me. That means—"

"You outmatch the bullet! That's incredible, the total opposite of the rest of us! You don't hide from reality; you stare it down and shrug it off. What a raw, powerful disorder. Is that why you're so... developed for your age? But, like, why not shrink instead? Less output, sure, but you'd get better fuel efficiency. A fifteen-year-old body wouldn't be bad in the long run, so why go for such a regrettable evolution?"

He scanned me with pity so raw it stung. Pointless or not, I slammed a heel kick into his face. *Whiff, thud.*

"Hahaha, no dice! Gotta wear a skirt for any impact to land! But seriously, stop! You'll punch a hole in the tatami!"

Oh. Right. I'd been sitting on it this whole time, so I *could* touch it.

"So, why'd you grow up? Ageing's a death sentence, and growing defies your whole deal."

"...In your words, just surviving wasn't enough. I needed to become unbeatable, no matter what."

"Hmm. Must've been one hell of a loss."

It was frustrating, but true.

I'd been free out there, living large, until a human crushed me, landing me in this hospital. Since then, for the sake of the one who beat me, I had embraced ageing—and as a result, growth.

"It's just a delusion of immortality. A terminal illness of never dying, isn't it?"

"If it really were that simple, you wouldn't be so tangled in comparison. If immortality were enough, you would be a perfect being, free from suffering."

He gave a weary shrug, his gaze heavy with a hollow pity, different from before.

"....."

Wait. In that moment, the haze clouding my heart began to lift. My frustration—it was simply...

“But even with a condition like that, your personality’s still so fierce. Immortality dulls emotions. Fear is humanity’s root; lose it, and joy, anger, sorrow fade with it. Your days must feel empty, no? A mind unchallenged by the unknown gets smothered by the familiar. Soon enough, you’ll realise you aren’t even living anymore.”

“Why? I enjoy every day just fine.”

“Really? You’ve seemed bored stiff this whole time.”

“Only here. Out there, I thrive on life. The world’s still full of mysteries. I’m nothing like you, playing god in this hideaway.”

“Is that so? I think we’re more alike than you admit,” he mused, his voice flat, stripped of feeling.

The truth was, we weren’t.

“How so?”

“One creature can’t die for lack of a reason to live, while the other lives because death won’t take them. Different origins, sure, but the outcome’s much the same.”

Point taken.

“Living, dying—it’s all a hassle.”

And there it was. After decades adrift in this strange cosmic voyage, he finally spoke a raw, unguarded truth.



“Bit late to bring this up,” I started, finally getting to my point, “but aren’t you trying too hard to be the quirky oddball?”

“Yeah, there was a time I leaned into catchphrases and eccentric tics. But when you’re plain at the core, it’s just... empty.”

“Says you.”

“Sure, but without a single trait to sum me up, a crafted persona was the fastest way to stand out. And, well, you’re so absurdly cute, I thought I’d at least keep you entertained.”

His breezy quip carried no real feeling, delivered like a workaholic worn thin by the futility of routine. But strangely, the fog in my heart had lifted completely.

“Hmm... So, behind the Ookumaneko act, you’re just another ordinary guy, dressing it up to seem special?”

“Cynical, aren’t you? Look on the bright side. It’s the other way around. Everyone’s unique inside, but that’s exhausting to show. So we lean on obvious quirks to be seen. Otherwise, it’s a lonely existence.”

“.....”

Lonely? Who? What?

Was this the narrow-minded need to be understood through a fake persona or the cold reality that you could only be understood through one?

Either way...

“Unbelievable. *You’re* the bleak one here.”

The lord of this universe stayed silent, indifferent to human sentiment, as if it never mattered to him.

“I get it. Whining about getting out was the wrong move all along.”

I let out a heavy sigh.

He nodded, as if to say, “Exactly.”

Yes, I’d missed the point of this universe entirely.

How did Ookumaneko Mokumoku end up cloistered here?

What kind of despair drives someone to seal themselves in a cosmos?

Without grasping that, this illness would never heal.

“Maybe you’re stuck here too?”

“Well, duh. If I could leave on my own, I wouldn’t be a NEET.”

“You admitted that pretty quickly, you hopeless case. No need for a bashful act or anything?”

“Not here. It’d only deepen your misconception.”

“Hm?”

Misconception? What? That fixing his problems would unravel this universe?

“You’ve got NEETs all wrong to begin with. We’re not about hiding away from our problems. For us, the problem itself might as well not exist.”

“Not exist?” I asked, tilting my head.

With a reluctant sigh, he launched into an explanation, as if it were a chore. It’d dawn on me later, but it was no less than a miracle that someone like him opened up to me.



And so, he began his story.

Work was a drag. People were a drag. Even despair was a drag. So, he withdrew, collapsing into himself to escape those external pressures. To him, NEETs weren’t a category—just the inevitable fallout of failure.

“You don’t know creatures like that, broken before they even begin. Pushed away by existence itself, before success or failure can even take shape. Some beings, no matter what they do or what’s done to them, can’t feel tethered to anything.”

It wasn’t a lack of feeling—it was feeling deeply, yet severed from all connection. His definition of a NEET, it seemed, was someone for whom the world held no weight at all.

“My parents tried to understand my condition, in their own way. My father, a geologist, I think, spoke of our Earth, not the distant stars. But those stories... they meant nothing to me.”

No interest in anything.

No attachment to anything.

Alive, yet lifeless.

No matter how fiercely he yearned or how much he learned, he couldn’t love us. He didn’t retreat into his room out of bitterness—

“I wanted to love my father. My mother too. I could see, like words on a page, how much trouble I was, how much they cared. I threw myself into my father’s studies

not out of passion, but hope that understanding their world might let me feel something for them, even if I couldn't love them."

But years passed, and nothing changed.

He didn't choose seclusion.

He simply couldn't summon care for the world beyond his walls.

"What surprised me was my father breaking first. My mother, driven by emotion, held on longer, never abandoning me. She wasn't especially strong, not by any objective measure, but a mother's love must be a vital force in life's design. Two years later, she gave up and called this hospital."

Even that, to him, was inconsequential.

He severed himself from it all—from society, from the world, from the very fabric of his surroundings. The ultimate exile, or an abyss of indifference. A solitary figure who drew breath yet stood adrift somewhere far beyond the cosmos.

"But you didn't despair over it, did you?"

"No. That's what indifference is. If I had any regrets—well, I suppose I do feel remorse for my past. My family never understood me, and likewise, I never understood them. Kind of sad, isn't it?"

Not felt as emotions, but observed as text.

Those around him never saw him for what he was, labelling it severe autism or profound emotional detachment.

Understood by no one, understanding no one, Ookumaneko Mokumoku withdrew into this room.

"This is a place without conflict—it's the Mokumoku universe, after all..."

Before rivalry, love, or hatred could take hold, he was indifferent to it all. Did he think he might finally find a place in such a universe?

“But everything’s okay now. I’m sorry, but my trauma is that I have none. This universe has no exit. No matter how much you struggle, you will never be able to treat or end me.”

...Okay, seriously. I’m really, really starting to get pissed at this guy.



I rose in silence, my eyes locking onto my target.

Glancing down at the tatami, I sized up the boundary line with a casual guess.

“So, you want out of here?”

“Not especially, though I wouldn’t mind the option. Not that I’d take it.”

He stared into space, bored.

Even after beholding countless cosmic wonders, his eyes held that same weary glint—part sorrow, part apathy.

That was the spark of my frustration.

This man couldn’t find answers. Trapped in this universe, he remained utterly untethered.

“Hm? What’s with the cracking knuckles? Feeling like we’re back at square one, ready to throw down?”

“As if. I’ve got better things to do than waste my time on a nobody like you. I just remembered that I’m in a rush! I’m *done* here!”

“...?!”

Pivoting on my left foot, I drove my right into the tatami, slicing it clean in half with a deadly low kick, sharp as a compass’s arc.

“Wha—?! My Fair Lady, my cosmic companion since the dawn of creation! Are you out of your mind? What’s the big idea?!”

“Hah! I’m at my limit, that’s what! Your gloom, my predicament, this hollow, pretty universe—everything’s insufferable!”

No more mercy. No more fretting over what was impossible or reckless.

“I’m going to tear this universe apart!”

Ookumaneko burst out in shock.

Ah, finally a genuine reaction out of you.

“What’s that?! Are you serious?! Don’t you know that it’ll take you eons?!”

“Dead serious. The stars you can see? Four thousand or so at most. Just watch—I’ll shatter your worlds, one by one.”

While he stood stunned, I snatched half the cleaved tatami.

Gliding through space was new, but, eh, it was just like snowboarding. Piece of cake!

“That’s absurd! I mean, with your condition, it’s not entirely unthinkable... But come on, how many millennia do you think that’ll take?! Meddle with the events, and they’ll crush you! Why risk it? If you can’t die, just float along quietly!”

Was he worried for me or his own fragile existence? For once, his voice carried real urgency.

The future is death. Why rush toward it?

The answer was clear. For us humans, standing still is death itself.

“Whether it’s real or fiction, every story needs a grand finale,” I said. “No clue how many volumes this’ll take...”

But time’s on my side, so I’ll drag him along for the ride. Whether it’s a manga or a novel, once I pick up a book, I always see it through to the end!

3.5 /

And so, my planet-slaying spree began.

That brings us back to the present, where I'm storming the capital of the Cat-Bee civilisation. I've almost cracked this universe's rules in their entirety—just three more transformations, and I'll wipe this place clean!

"Oh... why did I ever say anything?"

Ookumaneko Mokumoku's voice reverberates in my skull, a lament from his vantage point in satellite orbit, where he watches my onslaught.

This is the third planet I've obliterated. Looking back, it was his careless nudge that set me off: "What if I got serious and smashed a planet?"

"D-Rank Agonist Disorder is your self-image running wild. The desire you hold dear reshapes your flesh. If your affliction declares you 'the mightiest on that world,' that law applies to any planet you touch."

"Wow, why are you getting all high-and-mighty and lecturing me?! Wait! Are you imitating me?!"

"Ahahaha! Serves you damn right! When the maiden asked what it meant, the god of the cosmos answered thus: Whatever the planet's conditions, the instant you engage, you're endowed with unrivalled power!"

"If only I never told you!" he groaned, pounding the tatami beneath him in a fit of regret. Nothing had changed between us, but it felt like I'd flipped the script.

Flash back a bit. Nothing beats the thrill of a first, after all. Even I, fuelled by a resolve to destroy everything with a bang, paused to reflect on my feral ferocity when I crash-landed on that initial world.

Endless plains stretched to the horizon, swarmed by vicious aliens.

I died a few times adjusting to the environment, and then a few more times to their assaults, before I finally found myself on even footing.

After that, it was total domination.

On that first planet, I proved myself to be the mightiest being and claimed the throne in a heartbeat.

“Had your fun yet?” Ookumaneko’s voice crackled through, laced with exasperation.

Indeed, being the strongest didn’t mean you could destroy a planet. Even humans would need centuries to consume the Earth, for that was the ceiling of a single life. However...

“My condition’s all about comparison, right? So there’s still a bigger life to outdo here.”

With a sly wink and one strike to the ground—ten sharp thrusts, like splitting stone—a planet splintered beneath my fist. *Take that!*

Ookumaneko floundered, practically toppling over.

“This conceptual universe is my ruin! To think such a primitive tug-of-war would actually work!”

Primitive, maybe, but practical enough.

All I did was skip the millennia humans might spend on the same task.

“Three down!” I crowed, lost in the thrill of past conquests as I obliterated the Cat-Bees. My fist met the planet’s surface—tougher than I’d hoped. No matter. I dashed halfway around the globe, launched skyward, and with gravity’s pull, unleashed a lightning kick, tearing a chasm through to the lower mantle.

“Whew, good thing I could break it. Truth be told, I was a little uneasy diving in. Getting here was easy, but getting out? The gravity here’s no joke, and a shuttle would just be wishful thinking.”

“Yeah, that’s the first wall of space exploration! Most rocket fuel’s burnt just to escape orbit, and here you are, pioneering a wild new way to travel! Go straight to hell!”

His curses flew, but he was powerless to stop me.

We couldn’t even touch each other, after all.

All he could do was pray I burned out on the next planet.

“God, I’m exhausted. No time to catch my breath, though. Seven planets circle this sun. If I shatter them all, what’s left to compare against? Just the sun, right? Wait a sec. You said the universe itself is a living thing, didn’t you?”

Drifting weightless in the void, I locked onto my next target.

“Impossible. You’d be starting off with a clean slate on every planet! This one took you ten years to conquer. How many times, how many centuries, will you keep up this lunacy? I’m telling you, your mind will fray long before your body!”

“.....”

He wasn’t wrong. The endless stretch of it weighed on me, heavy and daunting.

But I was a product of the gaming age. Mindless level-grinding? I’d done it, big and small. As long as death couldn’t claim me, I’d keep charging forward, no overthinking!

“Micro or macro! The gap’s too big to sweat! Next up, that watery planet. I’m itching for a swim!”

I snatched the tatami floating in orbit, riding it like a surfboard.

In the heart of the cosmos, Ookumaneko heaved a massive sigh.



I gaze upon this miracle with eyes grown cold.



When I shatter the seventh planet, the sun simply fades away. Perhaps it’s the orbiting civilisations that gave it its fire. I never got to become a sundiver—a lingering regret—but maybe someday I’ll clash with a sun-like world.

“No sweat, I’ve got this! Next solar system, here I come!”

The grind is brutal but straightforward: touch down, adapt, dominate.

Each time, it merely demands an eternity of effort.

The ninth.

I teeter on the edge of tears, but a victory’s a victory—good enough.

“Rough ride, but I won again! Onward, next!”

The fourteenth.

Nothing stands out as grueling, yet as I aim for the next world, a quiet urge to rest slithers in.

“Yeah, anyone would be worn out after this...”

The twenty-fifth.

Right before diving to a new planet, I find myself hesitating, slowing without meaning to.

The fortieth.

“Still got it, I’m getting the swing of things.”

But my bravado sounds forced, more justification than truth.

The sixtieth.

“Yep, I’m good. Totally good.”

I reassure myself, tilting my head to tally the stars left.

The seventieth, seventy-fifth.

“It’s just... you know...”

The cosmos is boundless. Every world hits with a fresh jolt of impossibility, an endless cycle of deaths that never dulls. Truly.

So there’s no reason to pause.

At this rate, who knows how many centuries it’ll take? I need to move on, and fast...

The hundred-first.

“.....Haa.”

My lungs feel like stone. Deep breaths do nothing for my limbs. There’s no oxygen in space anyway.

The hundred-second.

“.....Haha.”

Being sliced into cubes was a first. I’m supposed to relish pain, but this planet wasn’t fun at all.

The hundred-third.

“.....Haa.”

A whisper slipped out:
“This... might be it for me.”



The annihilation of this cosmos marches on relentlessly, as the curtains are raised on her unraveling.

This is, after all, a universe born from a single mind's perception.

For every planet she shatters, my act of observing a new one outpaces her.

It's a matter of imagination's reach.

To transform a barren world into a thriving civilisation takes me a mere century.

But her streak of destruction demands far more than that—a futile endeavour from the outset.

Her deaths have already surpassed a thousand, destined to climb to astronomical heights. I gaze upon her pitiful form with eyes grown cold.

“Hah... Haa... Hah...”

Her feet falter. Her arms tremble. Her throat chokes out rasping, jagged breaths, like a boxer broken by a brutal loss.

“Are you holding up? You chose this fight, so I won't force you to quit. But if you're exhausted, you need to rest. Seeing something human torn apart... it's tough to stomach.”

“...Thanks for the advice,” she mutters, head bowed, finally grasping the grim reality. Her quest, her obsession—it's a labour without end. Surely, learning that creation outpaces destruction will make her rethink this savage pursuit. “The stars... they're not dwindling, are they?” she asks, her voice faint.

“No, new worlds are rising faster than you can crush them. Sorry, but even I can't change that—”

“...Tch.”

Her body quakes, a sharp shudder of defeat.

This is her breaking point.

She stomps the half-tatami platform with fierce resolve, then—

“Goddamn it, I knew it!” she roars, snapping her head up and slapping her cheeks. Vitality surges through her, erasing every trace of the battered figure from moments before.

“Fine! I’m done with this slog! Resetting each time is idiotic, anyway. I’ll smash the shit out of them! Two, three planets at once—kaboom!”

“.....”

Words fail me. Her despair isn’t born of the endless grind. It’s a blazing rage at her own weakness.



“I’ll smash the shit out of them!”

“What?!”

Ookumaneko’s incredulous cry echoes as I ignore him, pouring the biological traits I’d gleaned from the last three planets into my legs.

A one-time trick, maybe, but it’ll blast through a couple of planets, no sweat.

“Hold up, calm down! You can’t keep stacking powers without resetting! Your body’ll break, you know?! Being the strongest on one planet doesn’t mean you can evolve forever!”

“I’ll quit if it stings, thank you very much. Landing and wrecking each world is a hassle. I really couldn’t care less about their histories. I’ll just smash the entire planet, no questions asked!”

A strange, searing energy coils in my legs, thrumming with power. I envision myself as an arrow, glaring at the planets aligned before me.

“Nooooo, stop it!” Ookumaneko wails, his voice a desperate plea.

I ignite, a meteor streaking through the cosmos.

Two planets erupt in a cataclysm of flame. *Whoops*—my momentum shattered a third.

“That’s too damn much! Can’t you at least choose your targets a bit more carefully?! What are you, an oni? You are, aren’t you? What’s your beef?!”

“It’s the only way out! For both of us!” I roar into the void.

“You and... who?”

His voice fractures, drowned in cosmic static, but his urging for me to quit seeps through.

“Keep your pity. I’m not giving up. You just sit tight and get ready to leave.”

And so, I lock onto the next planet to crash into.

Destruction alone isn’t enough anymore—it’s about destruction *and* recharging. Build up enough power, and I can take the same shortcut as before.

“..... .., ...?”

His voice fades into an indistinct sequence. I can’t tell if it’s my perception or his shifting, but he’s slowly turning into a blur.



The annihilation of this cosmos marches on relentlessly, as does her unraveling. A fleeting resurgence of fire flickers within her, but it gutters quickly. Each new ordeal forces her to buckle, her resolve tested to breaking.

The two-hundredth.

Guilt for rending stars asunder briefly shatters her mind, a fleeting admission that she is the villain.

The three-hundredth.

Tears trace her cheeks as she clings to limbs no longer human, cradling them tenderly.

The four-hundredth.

Ensnared within a monstrous star, her body incinerates second by second, clawing at its own ruin, only to be reborn in the next instant. Trapped in an eternal cycle of death and revival, her heart finally succumbs to oblivion.

I gaze upon this tragedy with eyes grown cold, wondering if this is her end.

Forty years pass. A lone star streaks from the stellar furnace. It's her. Her form is a wreckage too harrowing to witness, yet it blazes fiercer than the star itself.

As ever, when her spirit should lie broken, it surges anew, defiant, refusing to yield.

The five-hundredth.

At some unseen turning point, the planets she extinguishes outnumber those born anew.

I gaze upon this miracle with a heart grown cold.



“Man, that was insane! Never thought that amoeba planet’s second law of thermodynamics beta would actually pull through! Total wild card. Cheers, Panda—your ‘nothing’s useless’ tip was a lifesaver.”

I toss a peace sign toward Ookumaneko, somewhere out there at the centre of the universe.

The signal’s been growing fainter, so I haven’t heard him much recently.

When his voice finally breaks through the static, it’s to note a milestone: “*So, the thousandth planet’s up next. Got any thoughts for the occasion?*”

“Thoughts? Hard to pin down,” I shoot back, my words weaving straight into his mind. “Every world’s a thrill and a slog at the same time. Thousandth or not, it’s just another day. What about you? You’ve stopped complaining. Have my efforts finally won you over?”

A thousand planets crushed by a single person’s hand—a feat unmatched in human history, worthy of awe.

“Tch. Not enough for a standing ovation, huh? Fine, next one’s gonna be a showstopper!”

I spin the cosmic tatami and rocket toward the next solar system.

With each world I shatter, the cosmos loses its luster, my rampage dimming its radiant sprawl.

And so, my saga of destruction draws to a close.

There's little left to note.

My next act comes when this odyssey ends—when I stand in the icy heart of the universe, deliver a non-lethal punch to Ookumaneko's head, and thrust out my chest with a smug, "How's that for you?"



The universe's annihilation———

as does her———

Enough. I shut my eyes grown cold.

She asked if her feats stirred me.

I bear her no ill will, but I have no sentiments to offer.

Through all she has wrought, and all yet to come, my core remains unmoved.

Not for lack of grandeur in her struggle, but because I lack the capacity to feel their weight.

But once, long ago, a memory stirs—a fleeting echo of something akin.

Back when I was still tethered to reality.

A room, sinking deeper into shadow with each passing day.

Cut off from the world, shunned by society, bereft of kin in that final hour.

A sealed chamber, void of life, barren of all visitation.

At twilight, when darkness swallowed all, a sudden light blazed forth.

It was a cataclysm, a torrent, a fleeting pulse of brilliance that seared the world for one incandescent moment.

The birth of a star.

My heart, long dead to feeling, stirred in that shadowed room. I, bowed at its heart, lifted my gaze to that blinding radiance.

I recall that instant—captivated, caught in a void so vast it stole my breath, a pang sharp enough to draw tears.

Yes. In the endless expanse of my existence, only that supernova's flare holds meaning.

The annihilation of this cosmos marches on relentlessly.

Nearly a millennium has passed in this universe's reckoning.

Through it all, she charges forward, never faltering.

Her strength is not what astounds—it is the fire of her spirit.

To her, a thousand years carry the weight of no more than one. Her focus is singular—locked on the now, driven by a relentless fervour.

Have I ever burnt with such passion? Such effort? Such raw vitality?

In my own small cosmos, did I merely lament my isolation, my failure to connect?

Or did I, like her, once claw desperately toward understanding, toward connection, toward change?

Whatever the truth may have been, it lies on a distant shore, lost to me now.

The events of that ancient self, billions of years past, are beyond my grasp, forgotten.

Even her supernova-like zeal stirs nothing in me.

And that, if I must name it, is a quiet tragedy.



"I might just want to set you free," I murmur, clinging to my playful persona as I transmit.

She'd probably already be charging toward the next world by the time the message reached her.

"What, getting sentimental over your precious civilisations getting trashed?"

No, I have no attachment to them. It's just... all that energy you've poured in, with so little to show for it... I find that rather heartbreaking.

“Huh? You talking about me? Or the civilisations I've wrecked?”

Neither, but I hold my silence. There's no need to reshape the order of the cosmos for human perception.

“So, you're rooting for me now? Total tsundere move!”

An outdated notion. But perhaps this urge to see her efforts bear fruit is not all too dissimilar.



And so, it all led here.
 The final flicker of light scatters into the darkened cosmos.
 Like embers crumbling into ash, fleeting as a shooting star, dissolving into the void.

The universe's end is declared. Four thousand civilisations—or near enough—reduced to nothing.

All radiance extinguished, drowned in an abyss of oblivion.

I strike the boundary of existence with a soft *thud*, the sound echoing in the silence.

“Is that all?” I ask.

Yes. Watching it unfold has grown... tiresome.

A voice rises from the centre of the room.

No spark pierces the oppressive gloom; not even my fingertips are visible. All I feel is the air shifting around me. The once-boundless cosmos has collapsed into a claustrophobic five-and-a-half-tatami cell.

A faint pang of regret stirs—even if it was a fabrication, the beauty of that cosmos was undeniable.

From that infinite expanse, my fingers now brush cold, mundane concrete.

This is the end. Now venture forth.

The voice speaks from behind, a mere two metres away.

“And you?” I ask.

Well, doors exist to be opened, don't they?

A half-hearted answer. I tighten my left fist, poised to shatter the concrete barrier.

By the way, I seem to recall you came here to kill me.

Oh, right. That was the idea.

“Don’t flatter yourself. I told you, you’re not worth my time anymore. You’re not on my list unless you leave this room. We’re done, you and me. But if you ever get the itch to die, feel free to step outside.”

I don’t look back, my hands tracing the concrete.

Knock, knock. Knock, knock.

I probe for echoes to guide me to a path beyond.

But something nags at me, a question I can’t shake.

“Hey. You once said my problem was a big one, right? Why?”

When was that? Millennia ago, it feels like, lost to memory. And if my recollection is hazy, his must be a fog. I don’t expect an answer, but—

Yes, I remember. Those words made me fall for you, in a way. Call it arrogance, but I’ve solved countless problems here—kept suns alive, charted new paths, ended wars between worlds. But my family’s troubles? Those I could never mend. You see. That’s a big problem, isn’t it?

And that’s why I’m here, he says, his voice heavy with rare emotion, as if this truth is all he has left.

“Right. But what about me? I’ve accomplished everything that you have, haven’t I? Now that I’m strong enough to escape this room, shouldn’t my problems seem tiny in comparison?”

No chance. You've only smashed your problems to pieces. Solving them is far harder.

A blunt, unsparing truth. Typical Ookumaneko, sticking to his cosmic-fat-cat act even now. Yeah, he's been a pain, but... I kinda dig his vibe.

"Alright, I'm outta here. But, uh, am I still human? Too dark to tell. Do I still look like a person? After all the crazy shit I've pulled, I'm worried I'll see myself and keel over."

No need to fret. When this universe vanishes, so too will all its events. Your two-thousand-year odyssey will be as if it never was.

"For real? Then I'm busting this wall now!"

Score! If all that wasted time gets erased, I'm set.

Behind me, he gasps, then lets out a wry chuckle.

"What's so funny? Is a girl smashing a wall that weird?"

No, he laughs, *it's just... so you.*

I scowl, not entirely satisfied, and swing at the wall.

Crash. Compared to the worlds I've crushed, it's paper-thin. The concrete crumbles, opening a passage wide enough for a person to step through.

Light floods in from the corridor, blazing like a sun in this pitch-black room, too bright to keep my eyes open.

I take a step forward.

Then, for some reason, I pause and call back over my shoulder.

"Catch you later."

Strange. I can't see his face, but I get the feeling he saw me off with a smile.

↓

A final word from me, as well. Watching you tear through planets was one hell of a show. You reminded me of the protagonists from those old anime I used to devour.

“Seriously? Personally, I feel like I’m more of a psycho killer.”

You might want to reconsider that. Heroes of justice usually cash out better in the end.

“What kind of payout are we talking?”

If I were still a kid in school, I’d be hoarding your LPs like a fanatic. Huh. So that’s the thrill of life, is it?

“LPs?”

Yeah, relics of a bygone civilisation. But there’s a certain charm in the analogue ritual of setting the needle down yourself.

↓

The glare forces my eyes to narrow.

All that awaits me is an ordinary reality: the Memorial Hospital’s corridor, a chaotic blend of screeching alarms, patients’ wails, and the sharp *pop* of guards’ gunfire.

After the cosmos I’ve traversed, this is my plain, unglamorous routine.

“No offence, but your universe was a bit over-the-top, don’t you think?”

No response.

A strange relief washes over me, and I glance back, almost by accident.

The corridor’s dim light spills into the room, faintly revealing its interior.

A wooden chamber, straight out of the Showa era, cradles a lone skeleton, long since dead.

“.....”

Yes.

Since my illness manifested, I’ve spent all this time in this universe. My whole room was hauled to the hospital and sealed for a decade—no one in, no one out.

So that’s how it was. He couldn’t break free from the outside of this world, not even at the very end.

◆

“...Haa.”

A quiet breath escapes me as I turn away from the cat box of Room 404.

That’s the tale of a shut-in I stumbled across.

As he said, stepping into the world beyond washes away most of those memories.

They’re not much use, so I’m half-tempted to let them fade, but some stubborn part of my soul insists on clinging to them.

The ability to forget is a human strength. Or rather, the freedom to choose what to let go is the true gift. No matter how grotesque one’s form or how wretched their heart, that freedom defines humanity.

But someone who can erase their past every day, without a trace of regret? That’s no person. That’s a devil, plain and simple.

And that devil is my problem—the fiend who traumatised his own little sister, battered her with a bat, and sent her to this hospital. He’s due for a long, deliberate reckoning.

“But first, gotta finish playing doctor before I head out.”

Until I leave the walls of this hospital, I’m the masked physician who’s still got patients to see.

Like that woman striding two corridors down, a smug grin plastered across her face. Her D-Rank patient gown flaps as she moves, oblivious to my presence.

I’m about to call out when a guard blocks her path, submachine gun levelled.

“Freeze, Hirumiya!” he shouts, firing without pause. But inexplicably, his shots riddle the ceiling, and he collapses, eyes white with shock.

She swipes his gun, clears the other guards with a jubilant *rat-tat-tat*, and presses forward, her smile practically glowing.

“That’s the spirit. Now that’s the kind of target I’m after,” I say, a spark of excitement igniting.

I stride after her, bold and unbothered.

Less than two hours remain before this hospital falls.

The stark, mind-bending reality still grips me, demanding focus.

The cosmic epic is over. Now, it's time to face my own fight.

He called it a big problem, but no matter how warped or unmoored, I'm still here, tethered to this universe. And as long as there's a connection, there's a sliver of hope.

The rest of the tale? Perhaps another day, if fate allows.

“Beyond the Cosmos” Kinoko Nasu / End